Trapped in a Psych Ward: 'I felt kidnapped.' Another patient comes forward after 7 investigation into MI doc

The 7 Investigators were the first to show you in February how patients have been alleging they were held against their will in psychiatric hospitals, or they say they were coerced into staying for treatment they don't need. Since then, we've received hundreds of calls and emails from patients and family members with similar stories. Now, another local patient has come forward to share her story of how she says she was held against her will.

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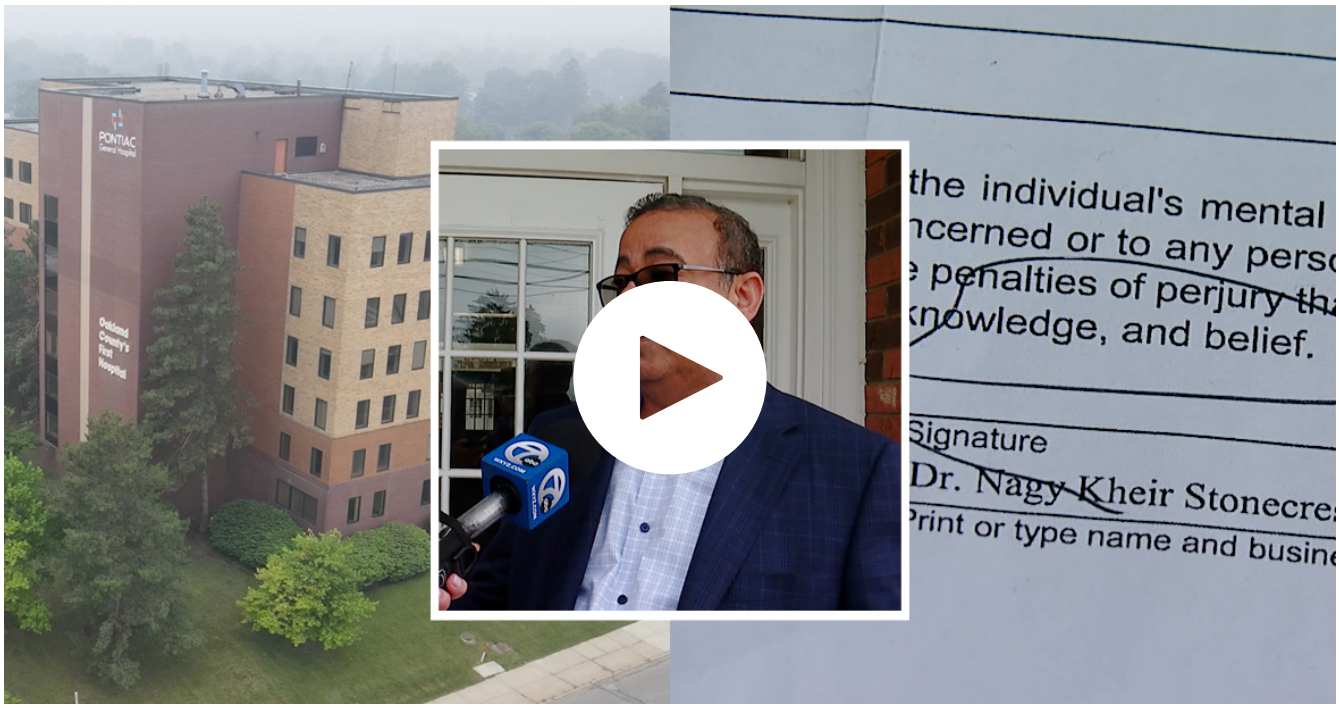
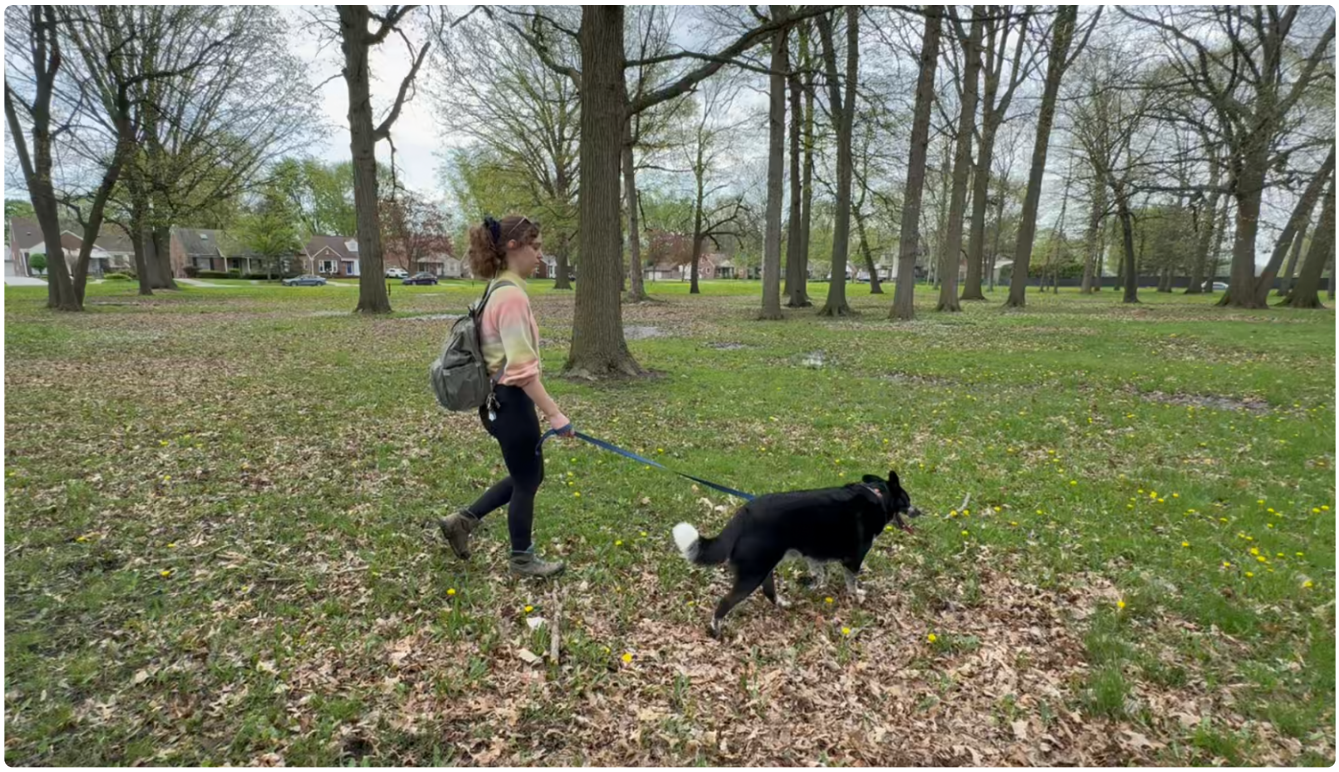
VIDEO: Watch the original investigation from February below:



Officials with Michigan's Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA) say they can't comment on on-going investigations, but the 7 Investigators have learned that more complaints have been filed with LARA about the psychiatrist in our story.

Being held in a psych ward comes with an almost a total loss of freedom: in many cases, you cannot leave the locked hospital unit until a psychiatrist says you can.

And now another local patient has come forward to share her story of how she says she was held against her will.



Sarah Guarino cherishes her freedom and her life after being locked in a psychiatric hospital in March.

“I felt kidnapped,” said Guarino.

The 31-year-old from Royal Oak says she suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and insomnia.

Guarino says a breakup, nearly losing her job, and intense fear she would be homeless led her to consider committing suicide in March.

“I was having what I would call a panic attack that lasted for quite a while. I didn't sleep for a couple days,” said Guarino.

Recognizing she needed help, early in the morning of March 13, Guarino called 911.

Royal Oak police took her to a crisis intake center where she met with mental health professionals. Once she finally got some sleep there, Guarino says she felt better.

“I kept asking, how long am I going to be held? They said maybe two or three days. And I said, ‘that's too long,’” said Guarino. “’I don't know if anybody's at home with my dog. I need to go back home!’”

But Guarino says she was then transferred to StoneCrest Center psychiatric hospital in Detroit.

“I was called out of the room where I was sleeping and told to get onto a stretcher,” said Guarino. “I’m agitated and confused. I am asking questions like, ‘what the hell is going on?’ And I basically got told, ‘you can stop asking questions and calm down, or you can get doped up and made to calm down and stop asking questions.’”

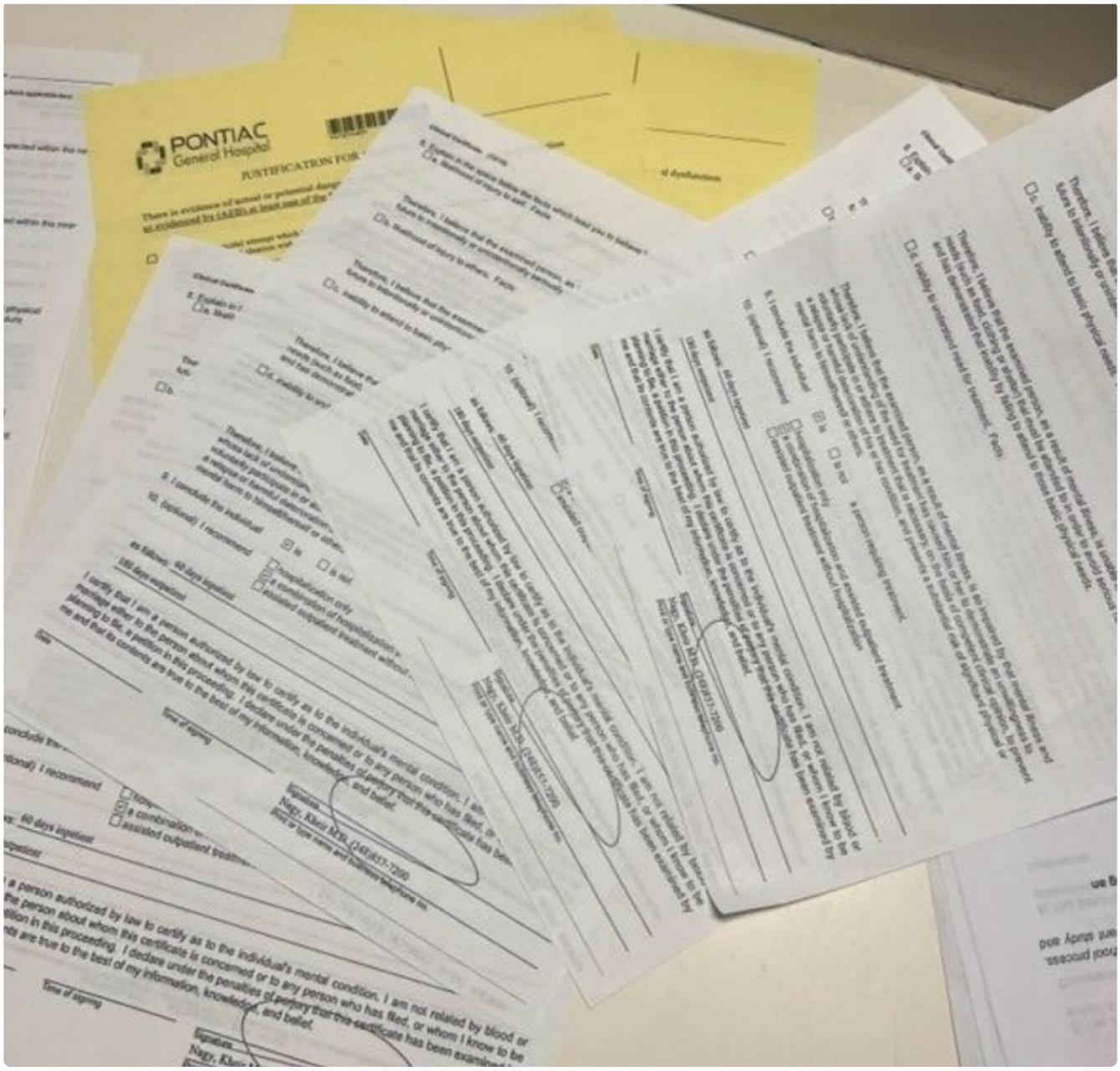
At StoneCrest Center, Guarino’s records show she was under the care of Dr. Nagy Kheir.

The psychiatrist works at StoneCrest, Harbor Oaks, and until last spring, he was Pontiac General Hospital's Chief Psychiatrist.

In February, the 7 Investigators showed you how patients alleged Dr. Kheir held them in the hospital longer than necessary to bill their insurance or their Medicaid. Dr. Kheir denies that he does that.

"Patients don't need to be in there that long if there can be another plan of care found for them outside a psychiatric hospital," Bethany Atwell, a certified trauma therapist, told the 7 investigators in February.

We also showed you how Dr. Kheir pre-signed blank court forms called clinical certificates that are used in the civil commitment process. The forms are signed under the penalty of perjury, and sources told the 7 Investigators – medical residents were the ones filling out the forms signed by Dr. Kheir. We even found Dr. Kheir driving at the same time he supposedly was filling out one of those clinical certificates.



For the first investigation, the 7 Investigators caught up with Dr. Kheir at his new clinic in Warren.

"You're pre-signing clinical certificates," I said.

"Yes," said Dr. Kheir.

"Before patients are examined," I said.

"Yes," said Kheir.

"Doesn't that violate their rights," I asked.

"Not uh, we examine them, but I sign it to be ready for the time factor," said Dr. Kheir.

VIDEO: Watch Dr. Kheir speak with 7 Investigator Heather Catallo:

Guarino says she only met with Dr. Kheir for a few minutes on a telehealth call at the beginning of her stay at StoneCrest.

"And it wasn't even a full interview. It was just him. 'Are you depressed? No. I'd like to go home.' 'Do you have suicidal ideations? No. I got some sleep, and I'm fine now. OK, cool. Thank you,'" recounted Guarino.

But Guarino says she was not allowed to go home. According to her records – StoneCrest planned to keep her for more than 3 weeks.

Guarino was in a panic to get out – her dog Enzo was home alone without food or water. She says her regular psychologist even asked Dr. Kheir to release Guarino to his care but was ignored.

"It's unprofessional. It's disrespectful," said Guarino.

Even though Guarino signed in to StoneCrest as a formal voluntary patient – she says was not allowed to leave.

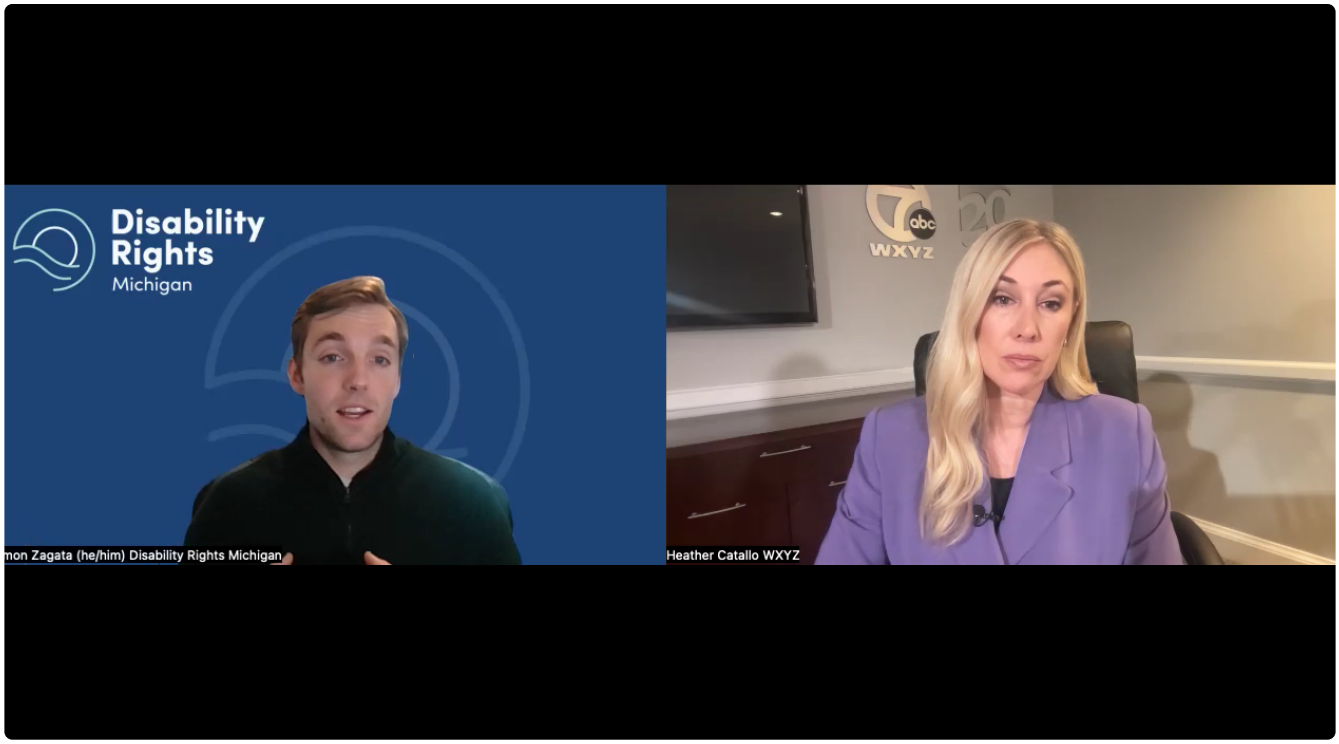
"I brought it up with the doctor every day: 'Am I being discharged?'" she said.

Guarino also says she asked for a lawyer, but wasn't given one.

Simon Zagata is the Director of Community and Institutional Rights for Disability Rights Michigan, a federally funded nonprofit that's designated to investigate abuse and protect people's rights.

Zagata says if you're a voluntary patient and you ask for an "Intent to Terminate Mental Health Treatment" form, the facility has to release you.

"They could let you go that hour. But in the very least, 72 hours – they either have to let you go or start that court process," said Zagata.



Guarino said it was hard to get the form.

"I asked the doctor for it, she said if I did that, they were going to open up a court case," said Guarino.

A court case means making you an involuntary patient – where a judge could order you to stay 30 days or more for treatment.

On Guarino's fifth day at StoneCrest, she called me. She'd been told about my first story on Dr. Kheir and the mental health system. After that phone call, all of a sudden, Guarino was cleared for discharge.

"The moment they knew that I was talking to you, suddenly I was well enough to go home," said Guarino.

"You're no longer suicidal?" I asked.

"Yeah, which I'd been telling them since I got there. But I was given all sorts of credibility the moment they knew I was talking to you," she said.

Guarino added, "Suddenly, this threat of investigation made them go 'oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, she's not sick. She's not sick. She can go

home.' They wanted nothing to do with me after that."

Days of her records indicated that she looked "bizarre" and she had "psychosis." The day after we spoke, Guarino's StoneCrest records show: "The patient is reporting improved mood" and "the patient was evaluated by Dr. Nagy Kheir, the patient is stable…"

While Dr. Kheir said he could not discuss an individual patient's case due to privacy concerns – I previously asked him about the allegations that he holds patients longer than necessary.

"Are you holding patients against their will?" I asked.

"No. I cannot do that," said Dr. Kheir.

"I'm not eager to keep patients, I'm not this guy at all," he said.

Guarino is grateful to be back home with her dog – but now she says she's furious her insurance was billed $16,200 for six days of in-patient treatment she did not want.

"I no longer trust medical professionals to have my well-being at heart," said Guarino.

"How badly do you want the system to change?" I asked.

"Very badly. It needs to. This is a complete misfire. I understand that there's laws in place that were enacted to initiate greater protections for people … but the way that it's being used by health care professionals is abusive," said Guarino.

The CEO of StoneCrest Center sent us a written statement that says:

"StoneCrest places the care, safety, and privacy of our patients as our highest priorities. While we cannot address specific circumstances, our staff follows rigorous state regulations, treatment timelines, and evidence-

based clinical protocols when evaluating progress and ensuring patients are safely discharged to their next level of care."

Meanwhile, once again, in the past Dr. Kheir has denied the allegations he holds patients to increase his billings, but he did not comment on this story.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF THIS HAPPENS TO YOU?

This issue of voluntary vs. involuntary admission keeps coming up in almost all of the calls I'm getting from the community.

That's why next Tuesday on May 14, 2024 at 7:30 p.m., 7 News Detroit is going to be streaming a virtual roundtable about your rights in a psychiatric hospital on our website and across our digital platforms. The roundtable is being put on by Disability Rights Michigan and the Mental Health Association in Michigan.

We want to know your questions, so we can answer them live during the stream. Please email me at hcatallo@wxyz.com.

Resources for those who may need help:

- Mental Health Association in Michigan
- Oakland Community Health Network
- Detroit Wayne Integrated Health Network
- Disability Rights Michigan

To file a complaint with LARA, click here.

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